

## Cancer Lites?

**Doctors Blast Ads for 'Reduced Carcinogen' Cigarette**  
by Daniel DeNoon - Web MD

**Nov. 21, 2001** -- Beautiful people relax in gorgeous surroundings, cigarettes grasped in their strong, young hands. They're just like other cigarette ads that glamorize smoking -- except these ads sell "Reduced Carcinogens." Vector Tobacco's Omni brand cigarettes don't exactly claim to be safer. Accompanying some of the ads is an open letter from Vector CEO Bennett S. LeBow that plainly states, "Let me be perfectly clear -- there is no such thing as a safe cigarette and we do not encourage anyone to smoke." The letter notes that Omni "has not yet been proven to reduce health risks."

There is no sign that such tests are actually under way. What has been proven, according to Vector, is that Omni tastes like other cigarettes. If this is true, Vector has accomplished what the tobacco industry has spent nearly 50 years and hundreds of millions of dollars trying to do. This Holy Grail of tobacco marketing is to make a normal-tasting cigarette that can lay claim to being less deadly.

What do doctors think about this? Randolph D. Smoak Jr., MD, is immediate past-president of the American Medical Association. He is not a man to mince words. "It makes no difference whether somebody stabs you with a six-inch knife or a seven-inch knife -- you're still just as dead," Smoak tells WebMD. "This is nothing but a marketing gimmick. It is not a forthright effort to contain, diminish, or keep people from smoking in the first place. It has no merit or value to it whatsoever."

Vector maintains that if people are going to smoke, they might as well smoke a cigarette that has lower -- but not zero -- levels of three deadly cancer-causing chemicals. "Smoking is hazardous and we do not encourage people to smoke. While there is no such thing as a safe cigarette, we believe our reduction in recognized carcinogens and toxins is a step in the right direction," Vector spokeswoman Carrie Bloom tells WebMD. "There are still 50 million Americans that smoke. We feel we need a passive approach for those unwilling or unable to stop smoking."

This opinion angers Smoak. "That is not good enough," he says. "They know they have addicted people to cigarettes. When they tell addicted people, 'Now we have a product that's not as bad as we've been giving you all along' -- that is unconscionable. To lead somebody who has been smoking for 40 years to think they would be better off taking a product not proved to be less deadly is wrong. ... The fact that you take out a couple of cancer-causing components doesn't make it safe. Any of the carcinogens in the tobacco product can lead to death and disability."

Vector may be the most outspoken tobacco company when it comes to admitting the dangers of smoking. But it's not the only one with a tobacco product that they claim to be safer. Jeffrey Wigand, PhD, is the scientist and former tobacco-company executive on whom the movie "The Insider" is based. His testimony laid bare the tobacco industry's decades-long effort to keep secret what it knew: the fact that cigarettes kill.

"Vector's Omni brand, the Advance brand of tobacco out of Star, Accord from Philip Morris, Eclipse from RJR -- all are purported to be safer," Wigand tells WebMD. "This industry has plainly shown -- through decades of documents -- that they have no interest in public health. I don't think this leopard has changed its spots." One problem with the new cigarettes is that they still contain nicotine -- the substance that addicted smokers crave. Vector next year will introduce a new, nicotine-free cigarette that uses genetically engineered tobacco. The company hopes to get FDA approval of the cigarette -- as a tool to help people quit smoking.

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"The way to help smokers to quit is to help them get over their nicotine addiction -- and this is best done with help from those who have the smokers' health as their first interest, not a tobacco company," Wigand says. "The tobacco industry has been saying they are going to help us, they are going to help kids, but they keep on marketing and selling addictive products. Why would I want to breathe in up to 8,000 toxic chemicals? When has a single tobacco company got into the smoking-cessation business? Now we are going to give out cigarettes as a cessation strategy? If smokers need something to hold in their hands, give them a pencil." Smoak, too, thinks nicotine-free cigarettes are a bad idea. "First, a cigarette is nothing but a delivery device for premature death. No matter how you dress it up or dress it down, it is the same product," he says. If you take away the nicotine, then people are not going to smoke it, because they do not get the nicotine kick. If people are still smoking cigarettes without nicotine -- if they will -- they still are exposed to the carcinogens. To say we will take away the addictive portion is no salvation. To diminish the nicotine is just a false sense of security and hope for people who are addicted and are exposed to carcinogens."

Even the tobacco companies are starting to say it: if you're a smoker, quit. No diet, no form of exercise -- and certainly no tobacco product -- can do more for your health.

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